

CRAFTING A CAREER: ETHEL WATERS AND *CABIN IN THE SKY*

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ABSTRACT

Briana Joy Frieda: Crafting a Career: Ethel Waters and *Cabin in the Sky*
(Under the direction of Jocelyn Neal)

Ethel Waters (1896–1977) was a path-breaking African American entertainer whose career spanned nearly sixty years, moving from vaudeville to Hollywood. This thesis addresses the 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky* as a pivotal moment in Waters's dramatic output, with her playing a role that served as culmination of the themes of her earlier career and as the transition to a new type of character. Beginning before *Cabin*, and moving through the end of her career, this analysis draws from biographical accounts in combination with close readings of the film to trace four main characteristics that govern her career and public persona: her assertion of creative control, her personal conflicts with female co-stars, her public expressions of religious piety, and her complex experiences with the racial politics of her era. Her oft-overlooked portrayal in *Cabin* offers insight into the tensions and contradictions that shaped her career and legacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	2
Writing Waters	3
<i>Cabin in the Sky</i> Summary	6
CHAPTER 1: ETHEL WATERS BEFORE <i>CABIN IN THE SKY</i> (1896–1940)	12
CHAPTER 2: ETHEL WATERS IN <i>CABIN IN THE SKY</i> (1943).....	30
“New Negro Womanhood”: Ethel Waters and Lena Horne, Katherine Dunham	31
Petunia, Waters, and Religion	35
Ethel Waters, Vernon Duke, and the Music of <i>Cabin in the Sky</i>	38
Waters’s Image and <i>Cabin in the Sky</i>	49
CHAPTER 3: ETHEL WATERS AFTER <i>CABIN IN THE SKY</i> (1943–1977)	54
CONCLUSION	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: First appearance of "Taking a Chance on Love." LOC Box 88, Folder 3.....	43
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INTRODUCTION

In 1943 at the Metro Goldwyn Mayer studios in Beverly Hills, California, rehearsals and shooting for the upcoming film musical, *Cabin in the Sky*, were in full swing. Two years earlier, the Broadway version of the show had finished a successful run, with Waters in a leading role. The renowned performer was making her way through the studio when she passed the sound department in time to hear her cast-mate Lena Horne's rendition of the movie's raunchiest number, "Honey in the Honeycomb." Raving that the younger singer was parodying her style, Waters went into one of her characteristic fits of anger and indignation, and – according to the account of co-star Eddie "Rochester" Anderson – did some "voodoo" on the dance floor right where Horne would soon be rehearsing. Much to everyone's dismay (save Waters's), the new, young actor fell and broke her ankle shortly thereafter, resulting in her recovering in a leg-cast and a dance sequence being cut from the film.¹

By this point in her career, Waters had made a name for herself in the all-black revues of Harlem, and had successfully transitioned into the more mainstream Broadway theaters. Audiences knew her well from her early 1920s "race records" released on the Black Swan label, her raunchy dance-moves, or her iconic performance of "Stormy Weather," her signature torch-song that helped her break into Broadway roles. Her film career had begun by 1929 with a cameo in *On with the Show*. By 1943, however, she was no longer the shimmying dance goddess or

¹Gail Lumet Buckley, *The Hornes: An American Family* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1986), 164–65. The term voodoo was Anderson's vocabulary to describe what he witnessed.

expressive singer of previous decades; she had gained not only wide-renown, but also a bad reputation in the industry for production spats with directors and co-stars, and not a few pounds. Her self-image and public persona had both faltered. For an entertainer at her particular career juncture, the chance to star in a film adaptation of *Cabin in the Sky* was a prime opportunity to re-assert her position as a performer at the top of her game.

Although often overlooked by scholars, the 1943 film musical *Cabin in the Sky* presents a defining moment in Waters's career. Analysis of Waters's career choices prior to and following the 1943 film suggests that *Cabin in the Sky* was a pivot point in the types of characters Waters portrayed. Through close reading and analysis of her musical and dramatic performances within the show, this thesis argues that Waters's performance in the role of Petunia was more than merely the typecasting of an aging black woman as supportive wife. Instead, it was through her performances as Petunia, both on-stage and on-screen, that Waters was able to articulate her continuing control over the roles she would play as an extension of her public persona, express her values in terms of religion, power, and her own identity construction, and negotiate her own place within the fraught racial environment of 1940s show-business in America.

Writing Waters

In recent decades, much attention has been paid by musicologists to the study of "race shows," here defined as musicals and plays in which most or all of the cast is African American, and/or the topical focus of the show is race. Most significant of these studies is Todd Decker's *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical*, which uses *Show Boat* as a case study of a Broadway musical in which its specific casting shaped the show itself, and placed black and white actors together onstage. Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*,

now in its fourth edition, is a wide-ranging assessment of African American performance in films. Bogle gives an in-depth analysis of the portrayals of black characters in American movies, and provides a strong background for understanding the problematic, traditional representations at play in many all-black films as well as in *Cabin*.² In terms of studies dedicated to *Cabin in the Sky*, however, little exists.

Musicological approaches to the film have been undertaken by a handful of authors, most importantly by James Naremore, Susan Smith, and Kate Weber-Petrova. Smith approaches the music from a film-studies background; her examination of *Cabin* supports a racially-progressive reading of the film as one challenging the expected performances of black actors on screen, while also noting gender-progressive performances.³ Naremore's essay contextualizes *Cabin* as part of a line of mostly or all African American-cast movies, during a time when studios were working to produce more films in that genre and the entertainers were fighting for better treatment from said studios.⁴ Weber-Petrova's 2008 master's thesis provides one of the first accounts of *Cabin* that applies ideas such as Bogle's caricature studies to the film.⁵ Her study offers a complete reading of the film through an investigation of the thematic materials of religion and folklore and the rural-urban binary, racial caricaturing, and her own interpretation of Waters Water's scenes as sites of new, liberal female blackness. What is missing, however, is a contextualization of *Cabin in the Sky* as an important pivot point in Waters's own career.

²Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001).

³Susan Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance* (New York: Wallflower, 2005).

⁴James Naremore, "Uptown Folk: *Cabin in the Sky*," in *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁵Kate Marie Weber-Petrova, "Beyond Racial Stereotypes: Subversive Subtexts in *Cabin in the Sky*," (M.A. Thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2008).

The broadest selection of material related to the topic at hand are biographical writings on Waters. James F. Wilson, in his essay “‘Hottentot Potentates’: The Potent and Hot Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters,” presents a comparison between the two nightclub performers while noting their unique abilities to critique black social status and the sexual autonomy of early- to mid-century female performers.⁶ In *African American Actresses*, Charlene Regester presents an artist biography of Waters, alongside other African American actresses of the first sixty years of the twentieth century, including Lena Horne; Regester’s focus is on the racial and sexual “othering” ascribed to these women in typical Hollywood narratives.⁷ Glenda Gill offers a brief but informative essay in which she presents the idea that Waters’s character choices may have reflected a decline in self-image, an interpretation to which this thesis will return.⁸ Finally, Shane Vogel gives a compelling assessment of black female performativity in his article “Performing ‘Stormy Weather,’” in which he outlines Waters’s early career and discusses her early application of vocal authority to the pieces she chose to perform.⁹

Indispensable to the current study is Donald Bogle’s later book, *Heat Wave*.¹⁰ This biography of Ethel Waters tracks her entire lifetime, offering a comprehensive account of her career as an entertainer, and contains invaluable information referenced from primary sources, as

⁶James F. Wilson, “‘Hottentot Potentates’: The Potent and Hot Performances of Florence Mills and Ethel Waters,” in *Bulldoggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

⁷Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁸Glenda E. Gill, “Tough Life, Tough Roles, Tough Woman: The Struggle of Ethel Waters,” in *Gender in Popular Culture: Images of Men and Women in Literature, Visual Media, and Material Culture* (Cleveland, OK: Ridgemont Press, 1995).

⁹Shane Vogel, “Performing ‘Stormy Weather’: Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham,” in *South Central Review* 25/1 Staging Modernism (Spring 2008), 93-113.

¹⁰Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

well as the author's own interviews. Furthermore, he draws from contemporaneous popular press sources, and the scholarship about Waters's colleagues to more fully illustrate her public persona and relationship to others.

Ethel Waters's own papers and memoirs provide primary source materials that richly inform this study. In her autobiography, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, she offers a personalized account of her life from the very beginning.¹¹ Tracing her difficult childhood through her early show-business activity and her multiple romantic attachments, Waters provides detailed and intimate illustrations of who she wants her fans to think she is. Published first in 1950, it came at a point in her career when she was still active in the field and was, indeed, on the upswing professionally. A later autobiography, *To Me It's Wonderful*, follows Waters's career through 1972, with a special focus on her time touring with evangelical preacher Billy Graham. In *Sparrow*, Waters offers her fans a carefully crafted and expertly pruned version of the biography she wishes to promote; in *Wonderful*, the perspective is still idealized, but is primarily a faith-based narrative in which Waters reflects on her earlier life and highlights the successes as results of her religion.

Cabin in the Sky Summary

Cabin in the Sky was the Broadway, and later Hollywood, incarnation of a story written by Lynn Root called *Little Joe*. In it, Root tells the tale of fictional Little Joe Jackson, a working black man in the south, who struggles with gambling and the allure of a woman who is not his wife. Despite trying his best to reform, on the very morning that he is to return to the fold of his church on his wife Petunia's arm, Joe succumbs to the pleasures of dice and ends up getting shot.

¹¹Ethel Waters, with Charles Samuels. *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1951).

After feverishly tossing in bed, Joe dies, but through the power of Petunia's prayer, the Lord's General is convinced to give him a six-month second chance on Earth to prove his goodness and save his soul. During his six-month trial return to Earth, Joe makes some improvements but is ultimately torn away from the righteous path by Lucifer, Jr., and his minions, characters who engineer temptations and lure Joe away from Petunia. Petunia observes his dalliances and casts him off, after which Joe takes up with Georgia Brown, a woman known for working the nightclub circuit, and lives the high-life from the winnings of a lottery. One night, Petunia shows up to Joe's regular gambling house in a new, glamorous gown and attempts to show herself off to Joe, his gambling cronies, and Georgia. She leaves her intentions ambiguous, whether she is trying to win him back or simply make him realize what he has lost. Her flirtations get Petunia more attention than she had bargained for, and she calls to Joe to rescue her. In the ensuing melee, Joe and Petunia are both fatally shot; but not before Petunia can pray for God to destroy the house of sin in which they are standing. Petunia and Joe are taken to the Gates of Heaven, where Petunia is instantaneously granted access, but Joe's account is tallied by Lucifer and the Lord's General and comes up short. Again, through the power of Petunia's prayer, Joe secures the Lord's grace and the couple ascends the stairway to heaven hand in hand. As they climb toward heaven, the scene dissolves and the audience realizes everything that followed the first shooting was all a dream. The moment of Joe's death never really occurred, nor any of the events afterward. Upon Joe's reawakening, Petunia returns to his side and – we presume – they live happily ever after.

The music for the Broadway version of *Cabin in the Sky* was written by Vernon Duke and John Latouche. Duke was at a party when he was approached by Lynn Root to write the score. Duke did not agree to compose for the show immediately, however, later explaining in his

own autobiography that he had some doubts about his ability to write in the African-American musical idiom; after some reflection, he rescinded his initial refusal and got in touch with the other members of the creating team. After conferring with Broadway writer and comedian (and brother of Lorenz) Teddy Hart, producer Milton “Doc” Bender, and Broadway choreographer George Balanchine, Duke began the search for a lyricist to work with. His favored partner was Ira Gershwin, but he was already engaged in writing a show with Kurt Weill and Moss Hart. Duke also asked Yip Harburg to collaborate on the score, but Harburg turned him down for what Duke later recalled was the show’s “lack of significance, social or otherwise.”¹² Eventually, Duke was able to secure a writing partner in Johnny Latouche, a young man from Richmond, Virginia, whom Duke had assisted in selling some music. Latouche was enthusiastic, and was brought on board the project at the same time as producer Albert Lewis. Duke also collaborated on the music for the ballet sequences with Balanchine.¹³

The collaboration of Duke, Ballanchine, and Teddy Hart was one in a long series of Broadway teams comprised of white, Jewish men. Ballanchine and Duke were, furthermore, of Russian descent, along with costume and set designer Boris Aronson. According to Duke, the “three Russians [...] pitted against the prodigiously gifted and eager, but bewildered, Negro members of the cast” made for interesting and highly-charged rehearsals.¹⁴

Financial support for the new show, now called *Cabin in the Sky*, was not initially forthcoming, though by the summer of 1940 it was almost fully funded. Backers included white

¹²Duke, *Passport*, 384. It is worth noting that Harburg indeed ended up providing songs for the musical once it reached movie form.

¹³Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 384.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 389.

Broadway theater owner-operator and producers Martin Beck, Gilbert Miller, Sam H. Harris, and W. Horace Schmidlapp.¹⁵

Procuring the talent for the show seemed to have been an easier task. The producers and music-writers first approached Ethel Waters, a hard-sell, as she had just finished a successful run on Broadway in the show *Mamba's Daughters*. Having been asked to read for the new musical, Waters complained that she had objections to the show's treatment of religion, and wanted to insert her own flavor into the character of Petunia. Eventually, she agreed to take the role.

Following the star's signing, actors Todd Duncan, Rex Ingram, and Katherine Dunham were more easily attracted to the project. Dunham's dance troupe worked with choreographer Balanchine to create the dance numbers, but Waters had something to say about that as well, getting Dunham kicked out of two dance numbers so Waters could dance with her new beau, Archie Savage.¹⁶

In September of 1940, rehearsals began at the Martin Beck Theater. Tensions ensued between the set of white-Russian, Jewish "creators" and the all-black cast, frequently revolving around issues of conflicting dance styles, dialectic misunderstandings, and authority – broadly speaking. Although there were plans to have a pre-Broadway opening in Boston, a shortage of funds prevented it; there were a handful of relatively unsuccessful previews/dress-rehearsals in New York. It was only in the last two of these that the cast and crew realized that the show needed an early "heart-warming" song to hook the audience in the first half, resulting in the last-minute addition of Duke's possibly best-known song, "Taking a Chance on Love."¹⁷

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 388. Profiles for these Broadway-men were all found through The Internet Broadway Database, <http://ibdb.com/person.php?id=24027>. It should be noted that in *Passport*, Duke referred to Schmidlapp as "Harris" Schmidlapp.

¹⁶Gill, "Tough Life," 66.

Cabin's reception was generally positive, leading the show to run for 156 performances over the course of nearly five months, an impressive stretch.¹⁸ Although initially a financial “bust,” – it lost \$25,000 for the producers – the show was respected as an artistic endeavor, and did well on the road, playing to standing-room-only audiences across the country. The success of the musical play led quickly to the idea of a film. MGM studios purchased the show for \$40,000 – a boon for the Broadway team.¹⁹

The film version of *Cabin in the Sky* was released in 1943, directed by Vincente Minnelli – the third film from the young director. Although some music from the Duke-Latouche pair was kept, Yip Harburg, George Bassman, and Roger Edens contributed much original scoring and several new songs to the movie. Dance numbers became less frequent, and through a series of directorial and performer decisions, the main characters engaged in only limited dancing on screen.

In March 1943, Lena Horne, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, and Duke Ellington all signed onto the film version of *Cabin in the Sky*. Waters was to reprise her role as Petunia. From the beginning, the diva clashed with fellow cast and artistic staff over her part:

When we made *Cabin in the Sky* there was conflict between the studio and me from the beginning. For one thing, I objected violently to the way religion was being treated in the screen play. Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, Lena Horne, and many other performers were in the cast. But all through that picture there was so much snarling and scrapping that I don't know how in the world *Cabin in the Sky* ever stayed up there. I won all my battles on that picture. But like many other performers, I was to discover that

¹⁷Duke, *Passport*, 391.

¹⁸*Cabin in the Sky* was performed 156 times at the Martin Beck Theater between 25 October 1940 and 8 March 1941. “*Cabin in the Sky*,” on *Internet Broadway Database*, accessed 25 February 2015.

¹⁹Hugh Fordin, *The Movies' Greatest Musicals: Produced in Hollywood USA by The Freed Unit* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975), 72.

winning arguments in Hollywood is costly. Six years were to pass before I could get another movie job.²⁰

These “battles” that Waters fought included her using her sway as an important performer to garner the respect she thought was due her by the Hollywood industry, to craft the character to what she wanted her to be, and, eventually, to secure parts even more complex than Petunia, allowing her to explore her own range as an actor. In the end, the role of Petunia succeeded in establishing Waters as a major Hollywood actress, and served as the culmination of the young characters Waters would play, before pivoting to more mature character-types.

²⁰Waters, *Sparrow*, 258.

CHAPTER 1: ETHEL WATERS BEFORE *CABIN IN THE SKY* (1896–1940)

In all of her career, Ethel Waters claimed that her most important role was that of Hagar, in the 1939 production *Mamba's Daughters*. By 1939, she had established herself as a vaudeville star and was about to root herself firmly in the Broadway tradition as well. Hagar won her critical acclaim, while also showcasing the full range of her emotional and professional identity that she had cultivated up to that point. More significantly, it was the role that directly preceded her portrayal of Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky*, and, as such, helps illustrate Waters's complicated sense of self and accomplishment at the moment when she embarked on *Cabin*. A careful reading of her career up to that point, informed by Waters's own recounting of it, reveals four main character traits – sometimes in tension with each other – that most strongly defined Waters at that point in her career. Those traits came together in a unique and powerful way in the role of Petunia, but in their full manifestation, they also redirected Waters's career that followed *Cabin*, making the role of Petunia a noteworthy pivotal moment in her life.

Four character traits emerge over the span of her pre-*Cabin* career, both in secondary sources and in Waters's own accounts of her early professional life. First, Waters became deeply invested in her own agency within her career, from song-selection to contract negotiation. Such expressions of power and accounts of incidents where she triumphed were unquestionably an important part of her personal narrative as an African American woman working in the interwar era, yet they most significantly explain many of her decisions in the process of accepting and then shaping the role of Petunia. The second trait that influenced her entire career was her

infamous temper and inability to get along with female co-stars. Tucked into both her and others' accounts of her professional life are an unavoidable number of anecdotes about her temper, even when she attempts to soften or deflect attention from those incidents. The third character trait that evolved over the span of her career was the public expression of her religious convictions. More-so than the others, this trait reveals the pivotal effect of her time working on *Cabin*, wherein not only are Satan and the Lord represented by specific characters in the show but also Petunia's religious faith provides the cornerstone of the plot. For a woman whose post-*Cabin* career would be tied extensively to the evangelical preacher Billy Graham, the expression of religious identity emerged very slowly over her early career. Fourth, and finally, Waters's pre-*Cabin* career is marked by a series of successes whereby Waters broke racial barriers in the entertainment industry, something of which she was sufficiently proud that it becomes a theme in her autobiographical literature. Those successes set up yet another way in which *Cabin*'s Petunia was a pivotal moment for her when she would confront black protestors objecting to the portrayal of African American individuals in the show, a show that she defended as a triumph in part for its all-black cast. The emergence and maturation of these four traits over the span of her early career provide the context for understanding Waters in *Cabin*, a production that for her marked the end of one professional era and, for the audience at large, sat at a pivotal moment in American cultural history.

Although she often lied about her date of birth, claiming to be four years younger, Ethel Waters was born 31 October 1896 in Chester, Pennsylvania; she maintained for many years that she was born in 1900. Her mother, Louise, was thirteen when she gave birth to Ethel, who was the product of rape at the hands of a white man named John Waters.²¹ He was not present for

²¹Waters, *Sparrow*, 3.

most of her life, although his relatives and even his children crossed paths with Waters personally and professionally. Louise's own mother, Sally, was more responsible for caring for Waters than she was; Waters called Louise "Momweeze" throughout her life, but called Sally her real "Mom."²²

Through her grandmother's care, Waters was in and out of schools and churches, to which she attributed her love of both singing and of Jesus, whom she later wrote that she had found when she was twelve years old. She performed in church when she was only five years old. Thanks to Sally, Waters was able to take dance classes and attend a Catholic school; she claimed that the first time she truly felt loved was when she was under the tutelage of the nuns. School became a moot point, however, when Waters was thirteen. Her mother had granted permission for an older man to take Waters as his wife. The two divorced after just a year of marriage, and Waters returned to the life the rest of her family and friends led, taking odd jobs usually in hotels and enjoying the musical offerings available at the cabarets and clubs near her home. She claimed to have never consciously planned or hoped for a career in entertainment, but her early attempts to craft a colorful identity might suggest otherwise. She seemed to fall into the career, according to the now-legendary story of her discovery.

On her birthday – Halloween – in 1917, Waters was with some friends at an amateur night at Jack's Rathskeller club. Her friends convinced her to get on stage, so she did. Waters sang "When You're A Long, Long Way From Home," and the crowd went wild. In the audience that night was the vaudeville recruitment pair, Braxton and Nugent; they liked what Waters did and approached her after her performance. The agents offered her a contract on the "chitlin' circuit" (Baltimore, Washington D.C., Chicago, etc.), with a guaranteed income of ten dollars a

²²*Ibid.*

week. At that time she was working as a maid and making less than four dollars a week, so to Waters this appealed to her as a great way to make more, and – even if it turned out not to work – it would be a quick chance to make some cash. She accepted the offer and left shortly thereafter on her first tour, performing first at Lincoln Theater in Baltimore, Maryland.

Even at this early stage of her career, Waters was exercising control over what she would perform, and how. As she relates in her autobiography:

I wanted to sing a new number that I'd once heard Charles Anderson, a very good female impersonator, do. Braxton and Nugent said it was a restricted song and I'd have to get permission from the copyright owners, Pace and Handy, in Memphis, Tennessee, before I could sing it on stage [...] The song I wanted to sing was "St. Louis Blues." Pace and Handy answered my letter by granting me permission. That was how I, a seventeen-year-old novice, became the first woman – and the second person – ever to sing professionally that song which is now a classic and, according to many people, the greatest blues ever written.²³

W.C. Handy's jazz-pop crossover hit, "St. Louis Blues," gave Waters the chance to do a little acting as part of her singing, and really tell a story, which is one of the facets of her performance that is often discussed in academic-literature about her career.

Early in her career, Waters had to learn how to handle monetary negotiations, as well as to navigate within the established social codes of the theater business. Dealing as a woman, even a reputedly strong-willed one, with agents, producers, and co-stars whom she had to out-smart was a challenge. She learned the hard way that some representatives were dishonest and would hold out on their clients, especially if the clients were young women. One evening after a performance at the Lincoln Theatre in Baltimore, Waters overheard Braxton and Nugent discussing how they would split the fifteen dollars they would have left of the money Waters was earning; the theater was paying the agents twenty-five dollars for her to perform, but she was

²³Waters, *Sparrow*, 73. It should be noted that Waters was still lying about her age at this time; she was actually twenty-one.

only getting ten.²⁴ Upon learning of that arrangement, she left mid-contract. From that point on, Waters made a point of being in control of the financial aspect of her career, never trusting her managers to dictate her pay, but always holding the reigns in terms of how much she asked for performances, and deciding where she would play.

After her short engagement in Baltimore and some short tours with the Hill Sisters, Waters moved back to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she performed at the Standard until 1917, when she moved to Barry Gordon's saloon. To cater to her audience's preferences, Waters maintained a repertoire of blues tunes and other raunchy songs that skewed sharply toward double-entendre-laden lyrics. Accompanying her suggestive singing was her equally suggestive dancing. A car accident that had occurred in Birmingham, Alabama, during her time touring with the Hills left Waters with a weak leg, which kept her from most styles of dancing. This was no block to her shimmying in these Philadelphia joints, however. The shimmy was a popular dance move used in vaudeville that involved vigorous shaking of the shoulders and the hips, seen as exotic and erotically-charged. According to cultural historian James F. Wilson, Waters was responsible for introducing the shimmy to middle-class black audiences, assimilating the move within social dances and, eventually, in Broadway. The shimmy, as Wilson argues, was a symbol of the independent, modern woman; the physicality of the motions involved were signs of a newly liberated expression of female sexuality, especially relative to the prior predominant Victorian sensibilities.²⁵ In the 1920s, and into the Depression-Era, the shimmy was a release for working-class women from the sometimes oppressive demands of their domestic lives.

²⁴Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 29.

²⁵Wilson, "Hottentot Potentates," 132–35.

By 1919, Ethel Waters was moving up in the entertainment world and tried to relocate to the heart of the industry: New York City. Her first engagement was at Leroy's Cabaret. This venue still catered to African-American audiences, but was a step up in terms of audience members' socio-economic statuses. It gave her a glimpse of the kind of society people she could strive to perform for, while still doing the kinds of acts she knew how to do. Also in 1919, Waters joined the cast of her first musical revue: *Hello, 1919!* The revue had skits, songs, and dances, including one with Waters performing in blackface makeup and a dingy gingham dress. This kind of experience did not suit her, and helped her to cultivate the strong stance regarding race representation on stage that would re-surface later in her career, so she returned to Philadelphia.

Returning to Philadelphia to work clearing dishes at an automat was less desirable to the now more-worldly Waters; she went from pulling in a respectable sum down to seventy-five cents and a warm meal a day. So when a friend offered the chance for her to perform in New York again, she took it. The job was at the Lincoln Theatre in Harlem New York, where she had a one-week contract. Her act – much like what she did in Philadelphia – was well-received by audiences, causing the Lincoln producers to extend her contract by another week. Her main duties were “singing the blues between acts” and “a few lines to speak in the olio show.”²⁶

For the next four years, Waters would perform at a small venue in Harlem known as Edmond's. During her time at Edmond's, Waters perfected her shimmying dances and her bawdy-but-not-too-dirty songs. There she also began to attract some of the wealthier patrons, both black and white, who had heard of her during summer engagements outside of the city. However, Waters was also beginning to enact the kinds of artistic conflicts that would occur

²⁶Waters, *Sparrow*, 122.

frequently in her later career. For example, at one point, Edmond himself – the venue owner – tried to dictate what she could perform, and only allowed her to sing with a small jazz ensemble; when he would not give in to her demands, she quit for the summer.²⁷

Also during her time performing at Edmond's, and while beginning to perform elsewhere, Waters began to realize that there was more to skin color than being black or white. In Harlem, she was already noticing a preference for the casting of lighter-skinned women in musicals and reviews. She had already suffered rejection from a new show, *Shuffle Along*, seemingly because she had a darker skin tone than the girls who were hired.²⁸ Performing with other black entertainers until that point had not really been an issue; Waters was still young and thin, in her prime.

Her live performances had been so successful that by 1921 Ethel Waters began a recording career. She made several recordings with Cardinal Records, and later with Black Swan, a label specializing in “race records.” One of the tunes she popularized, “Georgia Blues,” ended up becoming part of a Broadway show, although she did not. Her successes on vinyl led to a seven-month tour with a group called the Black Swan Troubadours. Between her live performances and the proceeds from her recordings, Waters was reported as being the “highest salaried phonograph star in the country.”²⁹

In 1923, Waters went on multiple tours, one with Earl Dancer, another with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, and one with Fletcher Henderson. Waters was the primary, and sometimes only, planner for the Henderson tour. On this tour, Waters demonstrated an unmatched level of control

²⁷*Ibid.*, 133.

²⁸Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 58.

²⁹“Ethel Must Not Marry,” *Chicago Defender* (24 December 1921).

over the content and appearance of the shows, compared both to her earliest jobs and to contemporaneous black actors and singers. She not only decided what to wear, what to sing, and which skits to put on, but also often wrote her skits herself, and planned costuming to match skit themes. For comedic routines she would prefer an old-fashioned, down-home look of bandanas, aprons, and gingham; but for glamorous songs and sketches she hired fancy stylists to design dazzling gowns.³⁰

The tour with Dancer occurred in large part because Waters's longtime friend and fellow entertainer, Ethel Williams, married and left the industry; the two Ethels had often performed together before, and now Waters was left alone. While in Chicago, learning of Williams's seeming desertion, Earl Dancer found his chance to work with Waters and took it. After the success of their joint tour, he asked to take over as Waters's manager – she agreed. After the debacle of management from Braxton and Nugent, Dancer was Waters's new ally in many ways. Further to her benefit, Dancer convinced Waters to take to the white vaudeville circuits.

Her tour with Earl Dancer was a success in both artistic and financial terms. *Billboard* reported in August of 1924 that the high-point of the season had been “the spectacular rise into prominence of Ethel Waters, the first colored woman in years to command a route and stellar salary on the Keith or Orpheum line.”³¹ Among the changes brought about at this time were that her pianist Fletcher Henderson left the Waters tour to begin his own jazz career. Henderson was replaced by Pearl Wright, beginning a working relationship that would span nearly the remainder of Waters's career. Yet for all the success, at the end of the tours, Waters was drained

³⁰Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 92.

³¹Quoted in: Stephen Bourne, *Ethel Waters: Stormy Weather* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 10.

emotionally and physically from the tour schedule, her own expectations of perfection, and the demanding rehearsal schedule. The tour taught her about her own limitations of endurance.

Waters's career in the city was also growing significantly, with many advancements happening by 1925. That spring marked the first offer made for Waters to perform at the New York Plantation Club, where she began influencing songwriters with her distinctive performance style. She auditioned for the new show, *Tan Town Topics*, for the composers of the show themselves – Harry Akst and Joe Howard.³² Akst and Howard gave Waters the song “Dinah,” and initially asked her to sing it quite upbeat; they did not like it that way, so they asked her to work it up and come back and sing it how she thought it should be sung. After working on it overnight, she came back and sang it in her own way - more relaxed and slower-paced – and they loved it, proving that Waters's fierce independence as a performer was something that could be trusted, and allowing her to craft her image during this early part of her career.

Waters's time at the Plantation Club also put her into early contact with one of her longtime rivals, Josephine Baker. Waters was ill during a couple of shows, so Baker was put in to substitute. The crowds adored Baker; not necessarily more than Waters, but enough that no one missed the originally cast star. Hearing of Baker's success, Waters came back to work before she perhaps should have. Encountering Baker on her first night back, she called her a “stupid darky.”³³ Despite the progress Waters had made and the different kinds of performers she had encountered, she was still judging – both herself and others – based on the darkness of their skin; Baker had very dark skin, while Waters was lighter – each still were navigating the fact that the racial codes of darkness were still in place. In other situations, Baker and Waters would continue

³²Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 107, 109.

³³Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 114.

their feud, with Baker even saying that Waters “made a career of being black.”³⁴ This episode illustrates both Waters’s conflicted sense of racial identity within the entertainment sphere and also her growing tendency to fuel conflict with female co-stars, both characteristics that would reach a boiling point in the film production of *Cabin in the Sky*.

Over the next decade, Waters clashed with other black female singers as well as Baker, although the events do not always seem to be aligned with the prevailing skin color code, but often with what Waters must have perceived as threats to her success. Sometimes this was because the performers were younger, or thinner. In 1935, she overheard Billie Holiday taking an audition in Philadelphia with the song “Underneath the Harlem Moon.” Perhaps any other song would not have caused the same response, but that song “was Miss Waters’ big number,” Holiday later remembered. “I hadn’t finished the first chorus when Ethel Waters bounced up in the darkened theatre. ‘Nobody’s going to sing on this goddam stage,’ she boomed, ‘but Ethel Waters and the Brown Sisters.’ That settled that.”³⁵ These kinds of clashes seemed always to be brought on by young, up-and-coming, Black female entertainers; the most drastic conflicts occurred between Waters and Baker, and later Lena Horne. The problems were rare to nonexistent in most of her interactions with male entertainers, based on extant documentation; problems with management and artistic control came up between Waters and some of the men she worked with, but men did not seem to represent the same level of threat as women.

Between 1925 and 1927, Waters was still a prominent stage entertainer. In 1925, she toured again. The primary show that year was *Miss Calico*, a “tab show” – basically a revue – written by Earl Dancer, Donald Heywood, and Waters herself. Through 1926 and a new revue

³⁴Bourne, *Ethel Waters*, 11.

³⁵Billie Holiday, and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 63–64.

tour, *New Vanities*, Waters kept working with Dancer, keeping control over the writing, stage, and major decisions relating to her performance.³⁶ For many of the revues in 1925–26, Waters had to perform signature songs even when they did not make sense in context; audiences clamored for these tunes and without them, may not have come to the theater.³⁷ Even with the popular standards, *Vanities* faced financial difficulty and had to shut down.

At that point Waters decided it was time to clean up her image from her sexy cabaret persona, and craft one that would be recognized for more than a decade. The first step was to make clear her marital status, and make it clear that she was not “living in sin” with a man named Eddie Matthews. Many articles and advertisements had called them a couple, and it appeared that they did live together; in order to avoid more confusion, Waters and Matthews simply established a public farce of marriage and allowed people to believe that they were married, rather than confirm that they were living together out of wedlock. Another aspect of her identity that Waters wished to highlight was her pride in her African American heritage; to that end she began telling people that Frederick Douglass was her great-grandfather.³⁸ One might expect this new pride to come with a new political conviction as well, but Waters was never one to make direct comments on race, politics, or society. More apparent as an important part of her character was her religious devotion. Many colleagues had seen or heard Waters praying and fans had read interviews in which the star professed her love of Jesus.

³⁶Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 132.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 134.

³⁸Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 150. I have not, at this point, found any confirmation of this claim.

In 1928, Waters signed with a new agent, Harold Gumm – who was white. He was an effective representative and only asked 5% of her takings.³⁹ He helped her establish a new west coast tour in 1929; while she was performing at both white and black theaters in Los Angeles, Waters began to wonder about a Hollywood career. Her reputation as a talented performer was becoming widespread enough that Hollywood producers were also beginning to wonder about her. Waters was approached by former colleague Harry Akst and asked to consider becoming part of the new film production *On With The Show*. To her dismay, Akst and fellow composer Grant Clarke only wanted her for two musical numbers, not a full character part. Despite this letdown, Waters took control and negotiated for \$1,250 a week for a guaranteed four weeks of filming work, arguing that she would have to leave her guaranteed gig at the Orpheum to take part in their picture; what Akst and Clarke did not know was that Waters might already have been considering taking a break from the theater, as her accompanist was going to be taking a leave for a surgical procedure.⁴⁰ Her performance for *On With the Show* was a good experience for Waters, and was well-received by the studio. “Birmingham Bertha” and “Am I Blue?” were Waters’s songs in the new film and they allowed her to draw on previous experiences. They also turned out to be apropos of the times in her life. “Birmingham Bertha” was something of a farewell song to the spirit of the 1920s, which were ending; “Am I Blue?” was an introspective song, one of the more raw performances people had seen from Waters thus far; while she managed to maintain her composure, her palpable emotion in performance would later become a hallmark of her dramatic career. What this two-song appearance did for her career was significant in itself as it presented her to a wider audience, but was also important for what it did

³⁹*Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 170.

for other African American female performers. She was the first black star to be prominently featured in a Hollywood musical – Waters opened the door for other actors and singers of color to perform on film.⁴¹

Throughout the 1930s, Waters steadily added to her resume of musical revues and musical plays. One of her bigger successes was Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds of 1930*, which led to a collaboration between the pair the next year for *Rhapsody in Black*. Her demands for working for him on this show were steeper than she had asked before; not only did she ask for \$1,250 per week, she insisted on being able to finish the current vaudeville tour she was on, and join rehearsals late – she got everything she asked for.⁴² *Rhapsody* was unique in that it had no black caricatures, no comedians, no chorus girls, and no scenery. In terms of serious material, this was the first such show Waters was involved in. Part of Waters's contract an agreement from the producers to make sure the music assigned to her role kept her happy. The songs she was given in *Rhapsody*, "Washtub Rhapsody" and "You Can't Stop Me From Loving You," did more than "keep her happy." They allowed her to showcase her acting ability as she had to enact new characters for each sequence; furthermore, there was no double-entendre, or off-color content. The show itself was rather a bust, but Waters's performance garnered praise all around.⁴³

⁴¹Bourne, *Ethel Waters*, 16. Josephine Baker had acted on film before, for a European company in 1927; however, the market reached by that kind of release was not that reached by American Hollywood. Waters's role in *On With the Show* was as herself; that is, she performed as Ethel Waters performing in a revue.

⁴²Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 154.

⁴³Bourne, *Ethel Waters*, 15.

In 1933 more cast-mate clashes caused Waters to quit *Rhapsody* and begin to search again for new performance opportunities. She ended up at the Cotton Club.⁴⁴ Her most-famed performance to date occurred during the 1933 Cotton Club Parade; the song was “Stormy Weather.” Her biggest crossover hit, “Stormy Weather” became a legendary part of Waters’s status as a creative powerhouse with control over her performances. The vision she had was opposite that of the producers, but she brought them over to her way of thinking.

They had a new number that Harold Arlen had written. They were using a lot of mechanical devices to get storm effects. It was a wonderful number. But after listening to it I told them that the piece should have more to do with human emotions and should be expressed that way instead of with noise-making machines to interpret the rumblings and rattlings of Old Mother-Nature. [She told the producers:] I’ll work on it with Pearl. This song should be given a dramatic ending. I’m gonna see if I can’t give it that. But if I do, I will only want to sing it at one show a night. I want to give it everything I got. That will take too much out of me if I have to sing it in more than one show.⁴⁵

When she made her appearance in “Stormy Weather,” the mechanics were gone and it was just Waters. Her backdrop was a log cabin, and she stood against a lamppost; a blue spotlight shone on her. That was all there was.⁴⁶ The effect was hypnotic. People who had never ventured to nightclubs heard about Waters’s new number made their way in to see her. She recorded it and it was a hit. Irving Berlin saw it and immediately asked her to join his new show *As Thousands Cheer*; he bought out her contract from the club in order to work with her. For the first time in her nearly eighteen-year career, Ethel Waters got top billing. Granted, it was alongside white

⁴⁴The Cotton Club was an important nightclub in Harlem, frequented by white audiences but usually featuring prominent black artists.

⁴⁵Waters, *Sparrow*, 220.

⁴⁶Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 215.

actor Helen Broderick; but it was a milestone for Waters, Broadway, and the entertainment industry in general.

Off of the stage and screen, Waters had also matured. After several highly-publicized relationships, a European tour, and a string of lucrative, if not critically-acclaimed, jobs, she knew how to carry herself as a sophisticated woman. By this point, she knew how to handle the media: when to smile or laugh, when to keep quiet, and when to keep her temper under wraps. Waters marketed herself as humble and shy, and made sure she always balanced her success with modesty. Her piety and pride, combined, helped her manage her public identity.

At Home Abroad opened in 1935 and solidified Ethel Waters as a Broadway superstar. The staging and costumes were done by Vincente Minnelli, later to be her director for *Cabin in the Sky*. Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz wrote the songs, with four solo pieces for Waters, and a duet for her and Eleanor Powell – a white actor. The press, knowing her reputation for conflict when working with younger actors, published a story about Waters and Powell, claiming that the two had a foul rivalry. Falsified letters were printed, until Waters herself sent one in setting the record straight.⁴⁷ Beside Powell was another white star, Beatrice Lillie; she and Waters did not get along. This was partially due to the fact that Waters fought for top billing alongside Lillie; after Lillie and her agents balked at that idea, Lillie's name ended up above the title, with Waters's slightly below hers – but still above the title. The success in *At Home Abroad* helped Waters to keep spirits high and socialize. This socialization got her into the role that she felt was the most important personal and dramatic moment of her career: Hagar in *Mamba's Daughters*.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 276.

During a private party in 1935 held in honor of Robert Mamoulion, director of the new opera *Porgy and Bess*, Waters inadvertently made contact with the famed novelist DuBose Heyward and his wife. She was sitting with a woman who asked what she thought of the show, then the novel written by DuBose Heyward; Waters began discussing her opinion of another of Heyward's novels: *Mamba's Daughters*. She was singing its praises, discussing how the story paralleled her own family, and explaining how she would love to perform in it, when the woman announced that she was Dorothy Heyward. DuBose joined the conversation and it quickly turned into a soft plan to turn the novel into a play, starring Waters.⁴⁸ The play was written, and plans went ahead to get the production to Broadway. Hiring Ethel Waters however was a dangerous choice; she was viewed by many as an asset, but more as a liability. Her reputation for causing strife between cast-members and making extreme demands made directors and producers wary of working with her. After two others had refused to direct or produce, Guthrie McClintic finally agreed to work with her, but had to finish an ongoing show, so rehearsals had to be postponed until winter of 1939.⁴⁹

Because of the desire to keep Waters at the center of the production, the Heywards eliminated or pared down the white characters. Due to this, and its content, *Mamba's Daughters* was a startling show for its time. As Donald Bogle explains: "Here was a Broadway play that dramatized the tensions, conflicts, and aspirations of three generations of African American women. The Great White Way had never seen such a drama before."⁵⁰ *Mamba's Daughters* ran for 162 performances in its first New York engagement, but only seventeen in its second.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 273–74.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 303.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 309.

The role of Hagar was the most intense Waters had played to date, with the deepest character development of any role she ever played. In talking about her performance, Waters said “Even when I read it for the first time I understood instinctively that there could be no greater triumph in my professional career than playing Hagar; all my life I’d burned to tell the story of my mother’s despair and long defeat.” Indeed, to Waters, Hagar was Louise; and Waters became Hagar. The role established Ethel Waters as a major force on the American stage, and earned her accolades from critics, fans, and colleagues alike. Her performances were sometimes described as disturbing and overly-violent; she admitted to really almost choking the actor who played the man Hagar was supposed to kill.⁵¹

Although respectful of her performance, Waters’s costars almost unanimously agreed that she was a nightmare to work with. Waters was specifically mean to Alberta Hunter, who recalled “she treated me like a dog. Fine artist, but, oh, she was so mean. She called me every name in the book and wanted to hit me.”⁵² Other cast-members, Maude Russell and Revella Hughes, agreed. Russell reported: “she was the kind who would cuss out the whole cast with the foulest language you ever heard and then get sanctimonious and say ‘Oh, Lord, they’re mistreating me.’”⁵³ Later Waters would reflect as well: “When I don’t rest I get mad and bitter and I’ll scream at people. I’m still a mite savage, I guess. Maybe there’s real craziness in me. I’ll say things I don’t mean. I can’t help it. I’ll say them.”⁵⁴ With the success of the stage run, *Mamba’s Daughters* was almost made into a movie. No funding could be secured, however, so the film never came to be.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 245.

⁵²Frank C. Taylor and Gerald Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 147.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 311.

The experiences she had had through 1939 and 1940 helped Ethel Waters to feel secure in making her own creative and dramatic choices for the future. That future would hold the role of Petunia, which acted as a pivot point in all of her future character portrayals.

CHAPTER 2: ETHEL WATERS IN *CABIN IN THE SKY* (1943)

One night, some months after Petunia has thrown over Little Joe, she decides to track him down and get her share of his sweepstakes winnings. She correctly assumes he is at Jim Henry's Paradise Club, with Georgia Brown. As she enters the club, all eyes turn to Petunia, clad in a sparkly gold dress and lacy mantilla. "Good evening, riffraff!" she greets the patrons. "Hello, Jim Henry, thought I'd just drop around and give your joint the once over!"⁵⁵ Along with the attention of all the other men in the "joint," Petunia has secured Joe's. The estranged couple engage in a tense exchange, with Petunia explaining that Joe would be paying for her fancy new clothes and that she was sending her lawyer to collect her half of the lottery prize money. A moment later, referring back to an earlier scene in the movie, Petunia offers to shoot Jim Henry for a drink, with his own dice; he instantly understands that she knows his dice are loaded and offers the drink without "the formalities." While she waits for her "double King Kong," Petunia flirts with Domino Johnson, the man who had shot Joe earlier in the film. After having a drink or two and throwing some insults at Georgia, Petunia asks Henry to have his orchestra to play some music so she can get in the mood "to give out," and breaks into a dance with Domino.⁵⁶

This sequence, like many other scenes in the film, illustrates in myriad ways how Waters's personal views on religion and power play into the roles she was accepting, the characters she was portraying, and the way she was crafting her own identity for the public. In

⁵⁵Ethel Waters as Petunia Jackson, *Cabin in the Sky*, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer (1943).

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

her 2008 thesis, Kate Weber argues that in *Cabin in the Sky*, the scene where Ethel Waters dances in the club – mentioned above – is one in which she leaves behind her persona as Petunia Jackson, and performs *as Ethel Waters*.⁵⁷ Taking this idea even further, Waters's performance in *Cabin in the Sky* is a very specific culmination of the major threads of her career up to that point, where Waters the performer and Petunia the character merge entirely. Her interactions with Georgia Brown – although presented in the film in the guise of a betrayed wife revolting against the woman who stole her husband – mirror those between Waters and many of her contemporary black, female actors and singers; certainly, the sentiment Petunia expressed toward Georgia mirrored that which Waters exhibited toward Horne. Furthermore, Waters's negotiation as an aging entertainer presents itself through her adaptation of a role that at once maintained a respect for her religion, but also allowed her to exhibit her lasting skills as “Sweet Mama Stringbean,” the persona from her earlier vaudeville days.

“New Negro Womanhood”: Ethel Waters and Lena Horne, Katherine Dunham

While *Cabin in the Sky* was still on Broadway and on tour – before Lena Horne had anything to do with the show – Ethel Waters was already displaying anxious and jealous behaviors. Collaborating with choreographer George Ballanchine was dancer and troupe leader Katherine Dunham, an African American woman who had studied anthropology and dance, and chose show business over academia. Waters's jealousy toward Dunham surfaced when she felt her romantic relationship was being impinged upon, even if the “impinging” was in a purely professional setting. She did not like Dunham dancing with her newest love interest, Archie

⁵⁷Weber, “Beyond Racial Stereotypes,” 82; Weber interprets the scene where Petunia sings “Taking a Chance on Love” as another point, earlier in the film, where Waters's own persona takes over the performance and the audience sees her as herself, rather than as portraying a character.

Savage. To that end, she had Dunham removed from two dance numbers – including the scene at Jim Henry’s Paradise club – in order to dance with her paramour herself.⁵⁸ Noting that Waters became testier after Dunham and her dance troupe received a rousing response from the audience, Dunham recalled:

Ethel Waters was a difficult person, and I think it was because of her experience in an all-white Broadway theater [...] I would say that Ethel Waters did exhibit a certain amount of jealousy—not just toward me, but toward the whole company. When you’re starring and some other person or group of persons can get just as much applause as you do at a certain time, I think everyone has a certain jealous feeling.⁵⁹

Despite Dunham’s non-confrontational handling of her co-star’s temper, she was not asked to be part of the film version of *Cabin in the Sky*.

The studio decided to turn the character of Georgia Brown into a sexier temptress than that which was portrayed on-stage. A possible option in casting the role was Fredi Washington, who had played Lissa (daughter of Hagar) in *Mamba’s Daughters*.⁶⁰ The younger actor had formed a strong bond with Waters, who had asked her to address her as her mother. Waters very clearly did not feel threatened by this potential co-star. Had the casting turned out this way, the film would unquestionably have been very different; as it was, MGM decided to take a chance with an up-and-coming singer and actor, Lena Horne, instead. Waters did *not* have a positive relationship with Horne, seemingly due to the latter’s youth, talent, and beauty.

⁵⁸Gill, “The Struggle of Ethel Waters,” 66. Katherine Dunham (1912–2006) was an African American dancer and anthropologist. Her anthropological studies took her to Haiti, where she did research that resulted in her thesis regarding Haitian dances. Rather than further pursuing academia, she decided to pursue show-business. She began her own dance troupe and opened a New York City dance school in 1944.

⁵⁹Ruth Beckford, *Katherine Dunham: A Biography* (New York: Dekker, 1979), 105–6.

⁶⁰Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 373.

A witness to Waters's studio antics was dancer Joan Croomes, who recalled "[...] she would call Lena every name, like 'bitch' or whatever. I remember Ethel going off into the corner many many times and she'd be mumbling 'mother fucker' and she would be looking up at the sky and talking to Jesus...hoping maybe a light would fall on Lena."⁶¹ On other occasions, Waters would torture Horne in more specific ways, using her character Petunia's lines from the scene before shooting: "Georgia, ain't it time for your cooch dance? And that's the way she said it, only nastier," said Croomes.⁶²

One of the more famous anecdotes about Waters's behavior around Horne, as recounted previously, occurred when the older actor – incensed by what she thought was the young singer mocking her vocal style – flew into a fit of rage.⁶³ Waters had other similar outbursts directed toward Horne. "It was very tense with Ethel, and the fact that she was once young and beautiful like Lena, and Lena was stealing her thunder. And I guess she was a very, very bitter woman. I think she felt that she was the star of the thing but she really wasn't the star of the film [...]" reported Lennie Bluett, an uncredited dancer from Cabin's "Paradise" scenes.⁶⁴

In film-scholar Charlene Regester's account of African American women in film, she recounts how Lena Horne herself theorized Waters's outbursts. Horne saw the outburst as a lashing out against "the whole system that had held her back and exploited her."⁶⁵ At this time a

⁶¹Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 386.

⁶²*Ibid.*, In the film, Petunia turns from the bar and growls to Georgia: "Brown!" Ain't it 'bout time for you to get into that cooch dance!?" This is just one in a series of lines swapped between Petunia and Georgia which pivots around presumed jealousy, or basic insults.

⁶³Buckley, *The Hornes*, 164–65.

⁶⁴Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 386.

⁶⁵Regester. *African American Actresses*, 244.

new class of black women entertainers was emerging. Hattie McDaniel – known primarily for her role as Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind* – termed this the “new Negro womanhood,” and lumped Horne into that caste.⁶⁶ The “new negro woman,” as understood by McDaniel–and Waters, it would seem–was the lighter-skinned black woman; a sultry, “mulatto” type. The older generation of black actors, to which Waters and McDaniel belonged, were darker-skinned and tended to be cast in the stereotypes of mammies and maids. There was privilege afforded the lighter actors that the darker women were not granted. Although neither Waters nor McDaniel discussed the accompanying exploitation which came with the other stereotype; this kind of professional and industrial bias led to the prejudices felt on both sides, as exhibited by Waters and Horne.

This element of skin shade was especially complex for Waters, who differed from most of the actors with whom she was concerning herself, because she had a white father. Next to light-skinned actors like Lena Horne, Waters indeed embodied the darker-skinned description of black actors; however, as discussed regarding her earlier career in relation to Josephine Baker, Waters considered herself better off than Baker in a similar comparison of skin-color.

Combined with her reactions to Horne’s successes, Waters can be seen as reacting to the institutionalized preference for lighter skin tones in her acceptance of and behavior within the role as Petunia. In the context of the plot, Petunia was portrayed as “the better” character. In terms of moral fortitude, Petunia is the respectable woman in the film, a point that Waters considered especially important in her decision to take the role. From the personality traits to the musical numbers assigned to her, Georgia’s role is intended to be seen as the lesser-valued of Little Joe’s love-interests.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 163.

Petunia, Waters, and Religion

Throughout the film, Petunia is seen as a pious, God-fearing woman; she is constantly praying to and praising the Lord, and early on in the movie she brings Joe back to the fold after a recent bout fighting his gambling problems. It is her prayer that convinces the Lord and his General to give Joe a second chance at life. At the end of his six-month do-over, Joe is about to be denied entry into heaven a second time, but again Petunia's prayers and long-lasting devotion push God's choice in the couple's favor, and they ascend to heaven together.

In her own accounts of her life, written many years after *Cabin*, Ethel Waters consistently ties her success to her faith. This applies in both entertainment realms and personal life issues. In a strange parallel to her character Petunia, Waters was betrayed by a real-life Little Joe – Archie Savage. Some argue that her relationship to Savage allowed Waters to take on a maternal, or mentor, role, but friend and writer Zora Neale Hurston reported: “She is in love with Archie Savage, who is a talented dancer, and formerly of the [Katherine] Dunham group. They met during the rehearsals for *Cabin in the Sky* and the affair is on! It looks as if they will make a wed, because they are eternally together.”⁶⁷ During their fiery affair, Savage stole thousands of dollars' worth of cash and jewelry from Waters; her response was, fittingly, “God will take care of everything!”⁶⁸ Like Petunia, she left her rotten man, but trusted in her faith to help her through.

⁶⁷Fellow *Cabin* dancer Joan Croomes said “I knew that [he] was gay. And he didn't really deny it.” Quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 343. Whether the actor was or was not gay is immaterial, the important point to glean from this is Waters's unwavering belief that God would provide.

⁶⁸Regester, *African American Actresses*, 252.

Calling Waters his talisman after her great success in his first Broadway show (*At Home Abroad*, 1935), Vincente Minnelli recounts in his autobiography that Waters attributed her every victory, including those on the *Cabin* set, to God:

My good luck charm came through. Ethel translated her bravura, outsize stage performance into a more naturalistic film portrayal. She owed it to her very expressive face and eyes. Ethel, however, claimed she owed it all to God. She has a direct pipeline to Him, you know.⁶⁹

Petunia's religious conviction was one of the sticking points that Waters took issue with when deliberating over whether or not to join the "Little Joe"/*Cabin in the Sky* project. She recalled in her 1951 autobiography:

The role the producers wanted me to play was Petunia, the wife of Little Joe, a bad man [...] I rejected the part because it seemed to me a man's play rather than a woman's. Petunia, in the original script, was no more than a punching bag for Little Joe. I objected also to the manner in which religion was being handled. After some of the changes I demanded had been made I accepted the role, largely because the music was so pretty. But right through the rehearsals and even after the play had opened, I kept adding my own lines and little bits of business to build up the character of Petunia.⁷⁰

Waters also objected to what she felt was the film's mockery of religious subject matter. Indeed, to the modern viewer, the religious figures appear as caricatures.⁷¹

In newspaper interviews following the premiere of the musical, Waters claimed that she explained her qualms to the producers.

Do you think I'd pray to God, that's been so good to me, for a rascal like this Joe—the way you've made him in the story? Why, it

⁶⁹Vincente Minnelli, *I Remember it Well* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1974), 126.

⁷⁰Waters, *Sparrow*, 255.

⁷¹For more on these kinds of caricatures, see Weber, "Beyond Racial Stereotypes," chapter 3, 30–72.

wouldn't be fair to God. I don't mind the wrong things Joe does, if there's just some good in him somewhere. [About reluctance to join "Little Joe" after *Mamba's Daughters*] It had to be something I could care about. That was one reason I was so stubborn about Little Joe and the way Petunia was going to pray for him. I wanted it to be true. I wasn't stubborn for myself: I was stubborn for God. Because I've got ideas about praying, and I wouldn't stand for giving the audience what I didn't believe in. Petunia couldn't just pray for a man's carcass; it is Little Joe's soul she's got to pray for.⁷²

So, to suit their star, producers and writers changed Joe to be a more likeable character, one who was working toward salvation. In this way, Waters transformed Petunia from the hopeless "punching bag" for Joe to the powerfully-willed prayer soldier that helped to save his soul. Only by re-writing the characters and morphing the plot into one "she could care about," did the creators of *Cabin in the Sky* secure Waters's commitment, who was to continue accepting these types of roles.

Backstage, Waters's love of Jesus and her constant prayer were no secrets. She prayed each night, before the curtain rose, for God to help her perform. "Here in my dressing room I said, 'Lord, the curtain is going up, and I know it wouldn't go up if it wasn't Your will. So please, Lord, just put it in my mouth to do all right.' I went on, and He put it in my mouth."⁷³ She reveled in the cast singing hymns and spirituals, to ease nerves, and was frequently heard talking to Jesus while she was between scenes. When she became demanding or discourteous when others made mistakes, she claimed it was because everything had to be done with an eye to heaven for the Lord's approval.⁷⁴

⁷²"A Mirror, and Her Simplicity, Only School for Ethel Waters," in *New York Herald Tribune* (10 November 1940), CF.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 342.

After the filming wrapped on *Cabin*, Waters wrote in a 1942 letter to her friend Carl Van Vechten:

I'm serious and telling the truth when I say that I've been through Hell ever since August and at this time I feel that I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I was very unhappy during the entire eight weeks of the filming of *Cabin*. During that time I was also having Lawyer [*sic*] trouble and Property [*sic*] trouble plus a daily fight for that which I considered was due me at the studio.⁷⁵

And later, after seeing a preview of *Cabin in the Sky*:

I personally think that it is fairly good [...] I am in a much clearer mind. You see I have gotten rid at last of the law office and I have had an offer for the property. God is still with me.⁷⁶

At that point, although her career would be coming to a standstill, her performance onscreen as Petunia Jackson was lauded in all the major newspapers, and celebrated by those at MGM. She had struggled through the filming of the musical, but “God was still with her.”

Ethel Waters, Vernon Duke, and the Music of *Cabin in the Sky*

Ethel Waters claimed that, after some changes to Petunia's characterization she accepted the role “largely because the music was so pretty.”⁷⁷ The so-called “pretty music” was written by Russian-born composer Vernon Duke.⁷⁸ Although he was involved in the Little Joe project even before Waters, it was not without some qualms that he decided to join.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 391.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 392.

⁷⁷Waters, *Sparrow*, 255.

⁷⁸Duke was actually born Vladimir Dukelsky. He maintained a career in the classical realm, as well as the popular, using his birth name. Only after moving to the United States and gaining citizenship did he take the name Vernon Duke.

Originally titled “Little Joe,” it started as that unheard-of thing— a completed libretto (dialogue and all) ready for the musical setting. Its author was Lynn Root, a Minnesota boy and Hollywood scriptwriter; he met Teddy Hart, the comedian and Larry’s brother, at a Hollywood party, and handed him the script for Larry to read. Larry read it and, liking it, gave it to Doc Bender, who, liking it, passed it on to George Balanchine, who, liking it but not understanding it too well, asked me to decipher it. On reading the script, my first impulse was to turn it down because much as I admired the Negro race and its musical gifts, I didn’t think myself sufficiently attuned to Negro folklore. Yet, I loved Lynn Root’s book and couldn’t tear myself away from it. I had a maid called Florence, a tall, loose-limbed octoroon, still young and fun-loving, who spent her evenings jitterbugging at the Savoy. ‘Florence,’ I asked her at breakfast. ‘Do you think I could write a colored show?’ ‘You sure could, Mist’ duke,’ she declared solemnly. ‘Why, you is the music-writingest gemmun I ever see.’ This sounded encouraging; I tinkered with a few tunes and then tried [Jack] Robbins. Jack became highly indignant. ‘See what I have to go through?’ he asked Savino with stagy pathos. ‘I don’t need you for colored shows – I already have Duke Ellington. Why don’t you write me some modern-American instrumentals that the schools would go for? Vernon, Vernon, when will you learn?’ Ten minutes later I called Doc Bender and told him that I’d write the music for Little Joe.⁷⁹

In making this admission, in 1955, Duke was at once acknowledging his lack of expertise in “negro music” but also partaking of a trope in the statements of white Hollywood producers, directors, writers, and so on in which the white creator expresses discomfort with black music (or fashion, or dialect, or what-have-you) that is only assuaged after an endorsement from an African American speaking from a position of stereotypical disempowerment; for Duke, this endorsement came from his maid Florence. This same dynamic is most famously portrayed by Bing Crosby and Louise Beavers in the 1942 musical *Holiday Inn*, during a scene in which “Mamie” offers “Mr. Hardy” advice about getting his woman back. Later in the same passage discussing writing the music for *Cabin*, Duke further explained his and Latouche’s process of

⁷⁹Duke, *Passport*, 382.

song-writing: “In Virginia [...] thoroughly saturated with southern talk and Negro spirituals, we decided to stay away from pedantic authenticity and write our own kind of ‘colored’ songs.”⁸⁰

The language Duke uses, of fascination with but distance from black culture and music, permeates the literature on *Cabin in the Sky*, especially from those in higher-level creation positions. As discussed below, Minnelli and Freed both expressed a desire to treat the film with the utmost respect and artistry and treat it as any other “major film under the M-G-M banner.”⁸¹

Having committed to the show, Duke was active in engaging both financial backers and the performers for the show. Working alongside Al Lewis, Vinton Freedley, Dick Krakeur and Doc Bender, money was found “little by little” from the likes of Martin Beck, Gilbert Miller, Sam H. Harris, and Harris Schmidlapp.⁸² After securing the funds for the show, Duke, Lewis, Bender, and Latouche approached Ethel Waters to take the part of Petunia Jackson.

Despite the consistent reports from other show-business figures regarding Waters’s temperamental personality and forceful outbursts, Duke seemed to have little trouble interacting with her. “Ethel Waters was known far and wide as an extremely difficult woman to work with, but I won her over by a time-tested device – I hereby recommend it to composers wishing to

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 384.

⁸¹Fordin, *Greatest Movie Musicals*, 73.

⁸²Duke, *Passport*, 388. Beck (1868–1940) was a Jewish Austro-Hungarian immigrant who founded the Orpheum Circuit, built New York City’s Palace Theater, and opened his own theater in 1924. He died in the midst of *Cabin*’s performances in 1940. Gilbert Miller (1884–1969) was a successful Broadway theater producer; he won a Tony Award in 1950 for his production of *The Cocktail Party*. Harris (1872–1941) was a producer, manager, and theater owner/operator in New York City; he produced eighteen Broadway musicals with George M. Cohan and collaborated with Irving Berlin for the *Music Box Revue*; he was later portrayed by Richard Whorf in the 1942 film *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. The man Duke called “Harris” Schmidlapp was, in fact, W. Horace Schmidlapp (1916–1987), an American Broadway actor and producer. All information from the Internet Broadway Database.

please their leading ladies. I kissed her hand in lieu of ‘good morning’ and ‘be seein’ you.’”⁸³

The two got along famously and there were no reports of her exploding on Duke’s account.

In his autobiography, Duke recounts much about rehearsals and his enjoyment working on the show. He called *Cabin in the Sky* “1940’s main event, and the all-time high in my Broadway career.”⁸⁴ Besides enjoying writing the music for the play and helping in put the project together, Duke was extremely active throughout the rehearsal phase and opening performances, as well. He reported relishing working with an all-black cast:

Rehearsals for *Cabin in the Sky* started in late September at the Martin Beck Theatre. These were really something, what with three Russians – Balanchine, Boris Aronson, who did the sets and costumes, and myself – pitted against the prodigiously gifted and eager, but bewildered, Negro members of the cast. I must emphatically state that for all-around musical and dancing ability in the theater, Negroes are immeasurably superior to their white counterparts; they catch on more quickly, are born actors and throw themselves into their work with extraordinary relish—I’ve never yet seen a bored negro chorus girl.⁸⁵

From such statements and the overall discourse surrounding *Cabin in the Sky*, it is clear that the show was actively trading (on-stage and off) in cultural and racial stereotypes, which surely fueled the later protests regarding the play.

Like many other Broadway shows at the time, *Cabin in the Sky* was to have an out-of-town tryout in Boston, before opening in New York City. Despite the financial backing the musical did not have the funds to go on the road, so it was given in a few “pre-opening benefits,”

⁸³Duke, *Passport*, 389.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 382.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 389.

which were – in reality – dress rehearsals.⁸⁶ It was fortunate that a “tryout” was given, as the show was not as successful at first as the cast and crew might have hoped.

We had “first-act trouble,” as the finale was inconclusive and a letdown; a “warm” touch was needed just before the curtain fell. Vinton, an astute showman, was responsible for the idea of ending the act with Joe and Petunia alone on the stage, the wayward little man ready to turn over a new leaf[...] We needed a heart-warming song to put the first act over and underline the “turning a new leaf” notion. The song Latouche and I had originally written was a plaintive and rather “offbeat” lullaby, pretty enough but carrying no “sock”; it was in six-eight time, and few hits in the annals of our theater were ever written in that meter. Ms. Waters didn’t care for our ‘lullaby’ and wanted some ‘meat and potatoes’ instead[...] An afternoon’s work, with an assist from Fetter, followed, and what emerged was “Taking a Chance on Love,” one of my better-known songs, an immediate hit and a solid standard today. I took Waters to the downstairs lounge at the Martin Beck, in-between rehearsals, to play her the song, and she stopped me after the first eight bars, tweaked my cheek affectionately, exclaimed “That’s my favorite composah!” and was off, quick as lightning [...] ⁸⁷

The song, “Taking a Chance on Love,” turned out to be the most successful in the show and is, today, probably Duke’s best-known tune. George Jean Nathan, a New York City drama critic who had also voted *Cabin* as the “Best Musical of the 1940–41 Theatrical Year,” voted “Taking a Chance on Love” as the “Best Show Tune of the Year.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 390.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 390–91.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 400. Nathan (1882–1958) is also a member of the American Theater Hall of Fame; there is also a national award named in his honor, the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. “The Nathan Will,” <http://english.arts.cornell.edu/awards/nathan/prize.html> accessed 11 March 2015.

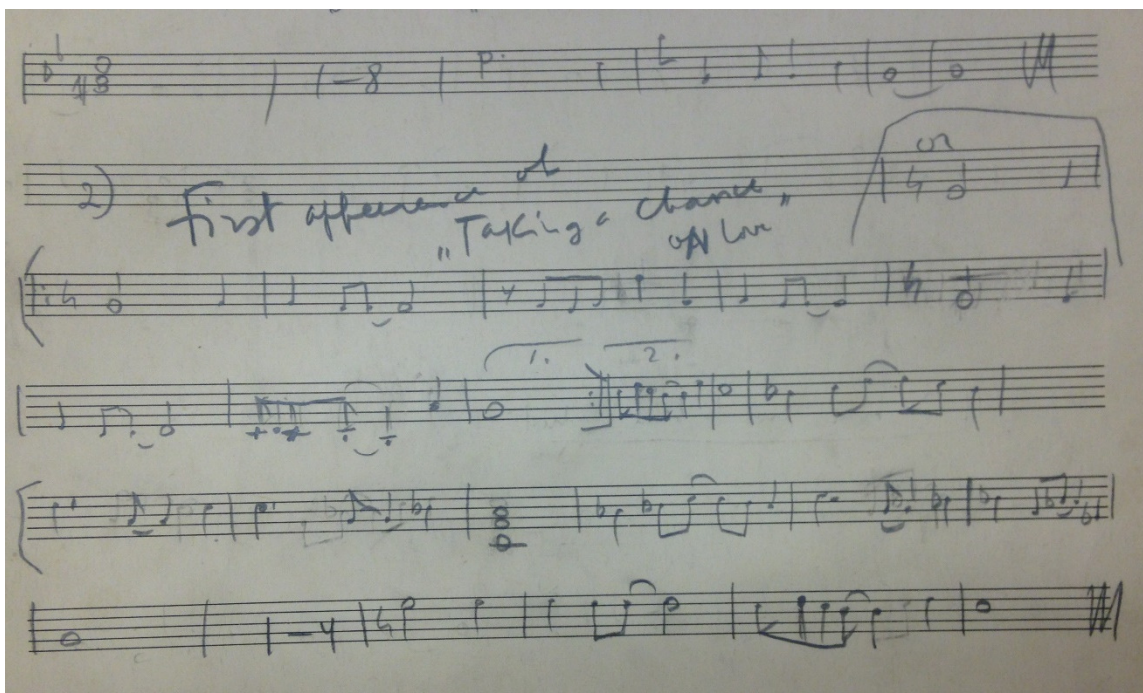


Figure 1: First appearance of "Taking a Chance on Love," in Duke's hand. LOC Box 88, Folder 3.⁸⁹

Having satisfied themselves, the producers and cast gave the premiere performance of *Cabin in the Sky* at the Martin Beck Theatre on 25 October 1940. The show was a resounding success in the theater world, with much praise given to Root, the Duke-Latouche pair, and – especially – Ethel Waters. Duke recalled of her moving performances: “If ever a song stopped the show, but cold, it was ‘Taking a Chance on Love.’ Waters kept coming back, again and again, tears of happiness in her eyes, singing chorus after chorus; five reappearances – no more choruses. To the best of my recollection, she had to sing the last available one *thrice*.”⁹⁰ Theater critic Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* published a glowing review of Waters’s portrayal of Petunia, with special reference to her rendition of Duke’s new song.

⁸⁹Library of Congress, *Vernon Duke Collection*, Box 88, folder 3.

⁹⁰Duke, *Passport*, 391.

Ethel Waters has been essential to happiness in the theatre for some time. But she has never given a performance as rich as this before. At the present moment, this theatre-goer imagines that he has never heard a song better sung than “Taking a Chance On Love” [...] She stood that song on its head last evening and ought to receive a congressional medal by way of reward.⁹¹

Although unremarked upon in the current literature, this moment in which Waters sang “Taking a Chance,” she was no longer Petunia, but was – in fact – the same entrancing entertainer that had delivered such performances in earlier vaudeville days; Waters was performing as herself again.

Shortly after the New York run of *Cabin in the Sky* wrapped up, the show went on the road, playing to full houses across the country. It opened in Los Angeles at the Philharmonic Auditorium as part of the 1942 Light Opera Festival. While performing as Petunia, Waters also gave some solo performances that would serve to reinforce the image she was working towards of a more wholesome and dignified entertainer.

Particular to that goal was a performance on Bing Crosby’s radio show *The Kraft Music Hall*, on which she sang “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” turning away from the seductive songs she performed in her earlier, vaudeville days.⁹² In this way, she was drawing on her nationally recognized image as an important African American performer, and also performing – literally – her religious character by singing a traditional black spiritual song.

Following the success of the New York run and the national tour, executives at Metro Goldwyn Mayer purchased the rights to the show. According to musical film historian Hugh Fordin, the original production of *Cabin in the Sky* actually lost the producers \$25,000, so when

⁹¹Brooks Atkinson, quoted in Duke, *Passport*, 392–93.

⁹²Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 353.

the studio bought it the backers ended up coming out \$15,000 ahead. Arthur Freed, famed leader of “the Freed Unit” of Hollywood musicals was ready to make a go of a film version of the musical; he said, “I will spare and will put everything behind it. It will be a picture on a par with any major film under the MGM banner.”⁹³

As stated earlier, Katherine Dunham and her dance company were not brought into the MGM production of *Cabin*, and the role of Georgia Brown was glamorized further and given to newcomer Lena Horne. Beyond the change in casting, music within the film was also altered from the original stage production. Producers at MGM felt the plot needed enhancing and decided to interpolate new songs. Vernon Duke and John Latouche were unavailable; Duke was in the United States Coast Guard during the entire process of *Cabin*’s film conversion.⁹⁴ As such, the producers turned to Harold Arlen and E.Y. “Yip” Harburg to write new songs. Arlen and Waters already had a hit together, as he wrote “Stormy Weather,” which had become a signature number for Waters, and the Arlen-Harburg pair wrote the music and lyrics for the 1939 *Wizard of Oz*. Ironically, Duke had originally approached Harburg to collaborate on the score for the stage production.

I then tackled Harburg, who was in New York, played a few strains and showed him the book; the book was turned down for lack of significance, social or otherwise[...] In 1943, when the M-G-M film version of *Cabin in the Sky* was produced, with Minnelli directing, Harburg thought the venture was significant enough[...]⁹⁵

⁹³Fordin, *Movies’ Greatest Musicals*, 72–73.

⁹⁴Duke, *Passport*, 383.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

Harburg and Arlen contributed the songs “Happiness is a Thing Called Joe” and “Ain’t It the Truth.” Although the latter was removed from the final cut of the film, “Happiness” earned *Cabin in the Sky* its only Academy Award Nomination.⁹⁶

Again, Waters’s portrayal of Petunia earned her critical praise. Thomas Pryor of *The New York Times* proclaimed:

Cabin in the Sky is a bountiful entertainment. The Metro picturization, which settled down at Loew’s Criterion yesterday for what should prove to be a long tenancy, is every inch as sparkling and completely satisfying as was the original stage production in 1940. In short, this first all-Negro screen musical in many a year is a most welcome treat.⁹⁷

Many of Duke’s original pieces were kept in the movie, the most lastingly-significant of which was still “Taking a Chance on Love.” In terms of importance to Waters’s personal representation of herself and of Petunia, however, the musical sequence of most importance is that during at the Paradise club, when she dances with Domino.

Donald Bogle addressed this scene in his descriptive biography of Ethel Waters:

In the climactic nightclub sequence that so troubled everyone in the cast and on the crew, Minnelli and Waters looked as if they had constructed a united front to call a lie to Hollywood’s traditional way of de-sexing and deglamorizing browner, heavier, older Black women. Even though she’s forty pounds heavier, she’s still Sweet Mama Stringbean, and she’s letting the audience know that, too.⁹⁸

Although the reference to Waters’s weight gain is based in fact and is documented in her own writings, Bogle’s interpretation that the scene reversed a de-sexualized and de-glamorized

⁹⁶Bourne, *Ethel Waters*, 51.

⁹⁷Quoted in Minnelli, *I Remember It Well*, 127.

⁹⁸Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 397. The trouble Bogle refers to is not that the cast and crew felt the scene problematic or troubling in any moral sense, but more related to the tension between the actors and their characters.

portrayal of a particular group of black actors, points to Weber-Petrova's assertion that Waters takes over the screen out-of-character at that moment. Within the context of the film, and even in the ongoing occurrences in film culture, this reading makes sense; however, neither Minnelli nor Waters ever spoke of that aspect of her performance or the intention in the presentation of that scene.

In addressing issues in his first major film, Vincente Minnelli never mentions the re-sexualization – intentional or otherwise – of Petunia. He admitted that sexualizing Georgia Brown was no challenge in her new depiction by Lena Horne. In terms of his representation of Joe and Petunia, Minnelli paid more attention to the sets, costumes, and even lighting than he did to their musical numbers. “[...] I wanted Petunia and Joe to look as attractive as possible, for the audience to be aware of their simple goodness.”⁹⁹ To that end, he asked for costumes to hide the weight gain that discomfited his older star; he redesigned sets from the original dingy and poor-looking hovel his set designer had given him to the simple but nice home he believed Petunia would pride herself in putting together; and he added a sepia filter to the film to flatter the actors' skin-tones.¹⁰⁰

After giving her own rendition of “Honey in the Honeycomb,” Petunia does a swinging jazz dance with Domino Johnson. It is in this musical scene that the Petunia character comes into her own and simultaneously allows Ethel Waters to shine through. Not only does the relationship between Petunia and Georgia mirror the one between Waters and Horne, but Petunia's new physicality also mirrors that of Ethel Waters. When she struts into the club, there is no more subdued and soft-spoken wifeliness, but the strength of a woman who can support herself and –

⁹⁹Minnelli, *I Remember*, 121.

¹⁰⁰Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 385.

although she likes having one – needs no husband: much like Waters herself. When Petunia sings, the lyrics of “Honey in the Honeycomb” are similar to the bawdy old songs Waters sang in cabarets as a younger singer:

There's honey in the honeycomb
There's nectar in the peach
There's candy in a coconut shell
And mussels on every beach

There's money in the savings bank
And I personally guarantee
If there's honey in the honeycomb
Then, Baby, there's love in me

Her references to sex and love, as well as financial independence – though written for the character of Georgia Brown, who functions as the foil for Petunia in the film up until that moment – are striking for their resemblance to Waters’s own relationships and life, as well.

When Waters/Petunia dances with Domino at the Paradise club, while the band plays textless versions of the themes from the show, it is important to note that this is the only extended moment of dance for a female primary character in the entire film. Horne did not dance, in large part because of her ankle injury, nor did Waters have any extended solo dances. The fact that it is a partner dance does not diminish the symbolic importance of it; indeed, it shows her ability to perform with others, but also her physical independence as a performer. Moreover, Waters incorporates the very move that so popularized her on the vaudeville circuit and served as a liberating gesture to female audiences at the time – the shimmy. The purely visual representation of Petunia in this scene speaks to Waters’s desire to show herself, as Bogle explained, as still the same talented singer once known as “Sweet Mama Stringbean.” This is easily seen when comparing photos of the younger Waters with the Petunia from the nightclub. Waters as Petunia is wearing a figure-hugging sequin dress, with a dramatic mantilla-style veil

and headpiece, dangly earrings, and metallic sandals; as herself, in photos from her time on vaudeville, she also wore form-fitting gowns, even more elaborate headdresses, and chandelier earrings. One aspect of dress that changed from nightclub to *Cabin* was that the younger Waters showed more skin; she more often wore dresses that showed her bare shoulders and were sometimes even backless. This change is, of course, a result of both Waters's advancing age and the changing fashion trends between the 1920s and 1940s. Although unremarked upon in both Bogle's and Weber's discussion of the "Petunia as *Ethel Waters*" phenomena, it is of too much importance to pass over. Waters performing as not only herself, but as her earlier star-self, was the culmination of the strands of her career that had gotten her to this point; that is, she re-asserted herself as a path-breaking black performer in the entertainment world and as a powerful figure in Hollywood, aspects of her persona that would fade after this film.

Waters's Image and *Cabin in the Sky*

Throughout her time playing Petunia, both on-stage and on-screen, Ethel Waters was busy cultivating the image she had been working so hard to create in the past decades, through her interviews and public appearances. She faced some negative criticism from racial activists, regarding her being in a film that – in their complaints – misrepresented the black population as poor and low-class. Journalists and critics printed snide comments about her changing physical appearance, and her tirades against co-stars became public knowledge.

When in some southern regions African Americans were picketing outside cinemas and protesting Waters's involvement in *Cabin in the Sky*, she made a public statement regarding the controversy:

They [the organizations fighting for racial equality] are making a mistake, I think, when they protest showing colored people as they

really are. There are thieves and murderers and wife-beaters among my people. There are also geniuses and saints and many Negroes who walk all their days down God's pathway. In other words, Negroes are human beings with exactly the same faults and virtues as members of the other races.¹⁰¹

Reactions varied after this statement, particularly as Waters felt it was “part of her civic and race responsibility to promote opportunities for young African Americans.”¹⁰² As *Cabin* was only the fourth film with an all-black cast in the history of Hollywood, Waters certainly lived up to her responsibility to find new opportunities for her fellow black entertainers. Hattie McDaniel, who won the 1939 Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, had achieved a level of comfort and importance in Los Angeles that allowed her to have a say in “who was who” in Hollywood. She hosted formal dinners at her L.A. home to honor those entertainers she felt were worth her attention; at one such dinner in 1941, organized to pay tribute to Waters, McDaniel proclaimed that “almost no African American performer working in movies garnered the kind of respect and admiration that she [Waters] did.”¹⁰³

Ironically, having just been recognized by McDaniel, Waters fought vehemently against being categorized in the same group as the distinguished actor. The public images of actors in Los Angeles were vastly different from those in New York City, where Waters had finally built up some hard-won respect and admiration. In New York, she was famous, glamorous, and even desirable; in Los Angeles, a higher premium was placed on youth and physical beauty. According to Bogle, “out there she did not wanted to be regarded in the same manner as Hattie

¹⁰¹Waters, *Sparrow*, 258.

¹⁰²Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 348.

¹⁰³Quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 360.

McDaniel or Louise Beavers [...] Hollywood culture tended to view them as likable frumps or mammy characters.”¹⁰⁴ As such, being forced to play on film opposite the thin and lovely Lena Horne challenged Waters.

As filming began, and following the film’s release in 1943, Waters exercised strict control over the interviews she gave and worked tirelessly to “gild her image and promote her glamorous lifestyle.”¹⁰⁵ In order to craft and preserve that image of herself as sophisticated and dignified, fitting into the lifestyle of the Hollywood rich and famous, Waters repeated much of the same material in many of her public statements and interviews. She frequently called upon details from her adolescence to create a phoenix-like persona for herself, a success coming out of all the challenges she faced as a child. In the end of *Cabin in the Sky*, Waters was reclaiming her identity as a glamorous performer after the initial portrayal of the mammy-type she was playing at the beginning of the film. However, Waters made efforts to distance herself from her sexy, or lewd, past. She frequently commented on the distaste she had for the “torso-shaking” of her early performing days.¹⁰⁶ In a comment she made at a lunch in 1944 to some friends, Waters further separated herself from the prurient antics of younger singers and actors, specifically denigrating Horne, saying “it was only the primitive sex appeal of that singer which made her popular.”¹⁰⁷ Within this framework Waters presented of being no-longer the sexy nightclub singer, the brief excursion she enjoyed as Petunia shimmying with Domino can be seen as a last chance to assert her one-time dominance of and lasting legacy within the dance and vocal style. At the end of

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 383.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁰⁶Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 345.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 408.

filming for *Cabin* Waters embarked on a campaign to clean up her image and craft a more sedate identity for the public.

Her struggles with her own presentation – based on her age, skin color, and weight – were previously private; but as *Cabin* pushed towards release, the press had begun publishing articles that, while not fully exposing her behaviors, revealed that Waters’s relationships with cast-mates were tumultuous, and there were new and recurrent comments on her weight gain. These kinds of negative attention upset Waters, but also pressed her to work harder to prove herself and made her even more determined to shine. In the years following *Cabin*, Waters believed that her fights on-set and the spreading of her “difficult to work with” reputation were what prevented her from having more work in the film industry. In her later autobiography, however, she expressed her feelings from that time, and what she later discovered:

At one time I suspicioned that the Hollywood tycoons, angered by my outbursts of temper while making CITS, were using their power to blackball me out of show business. But later on I found out that was not true. Today I blame only certain agents for my long eclipse as a public entertainer.¹⁰⁸

Learning that MGM was using Lena Horne to promote *Cabin* instead of her, Waters felt that her agent was not doing his duty; in fact, Harold Gumm was still working for her, but also was representing Horne. She fired Gumm in 1942 before the release of *Cabin in the Sky*.

Having fired Gumm, and having given a remarkable performance in *Cabin in the Sky*, Waters might have been at a strong point in her career. She must have thought so, as well, for she continued the carefully studied persona she presented to the public. Perhaps Bogle summarized it best. “Clearly, Waters, ever the performer, was usually onstage, even when off. Her daily conversations – punctuated with showy gestures – seemed a part of a self-created dramatic

¹⁰⁸Waters, *Sparrow*, 261.

narrative, or sometimes a dramatic monologue.”¹⁰⁹ Contributing to this dramatic narrative were not just the parts she played before Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky*, but ideas crafted around that role, which incorporated elements of who Ethel Waters *used to be* and who she wanted to become.

¹⁰⁹Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 363.

CHAPTER 3: ETHEL WATERS AFTER *CABIN IN THE SKY* (1943–1977)

Having left the MGM film studio at the conclusion of *Cabin* on negative terms due to her temperamental outbursts toward Horne, and alleged Jewish slurs, it was little surprise to anyone that Waters could not find film work for several years. The characters she played after *Cabin* were similar in that Waters had proven herself to the industry on stage and on screen, and even to herself. She took roles that allowed her to communicate her values in a much clearer way than before, and began crafting her dramatic and public personas to her own ideals. Shortly after *Cabin*'s release, Waters's last film for six years would be released: *Stage Door Canteen*, a wartime musical in which Waters, along with many other stars, made a cameo appearance. After the subsequent dry spell, she was again hired for two supporting roles, but the aged characters she now portrayed were, for the most part grandmotherly, and without the complex personalities that she had embodied so convincingly as Petunia.

The role of Petunia was not just a culmination of Waters's career up until that point, but was the peak of her time as a believable Hollywood star. Petunia was the last character that Waters played who was in competition for being the romantic lead; indeed, the two films that followed – *Pinky* and *The Member of the Wedding* – featured Waters in grandmotherly roles. No longer was Waters young and attractive enough to be flirtatious and seen as a young wife, but her age and hard-earned dignity meant that she could now approach more mature roles with a sense of gravity and solemnity.

The year 1949 marked Waters's next appearance in a Hollywood film. In Twentieth Century Fox's *Pinky*, she played the part of Dicey, grandmother to a young girl named Pinky, who was passing as white. Although Waters had fought against mammy-type or grandmother roles for so long, Dicey was one of her most celebrated performances, earning her both a 1949 Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actress and an award from the Negro Actors Guild.¹¹⁰ Waters's expected conflict with female cast-mates never occurred, although a clash between Waters and her director led the producers to remove him.

Dicey was a kindhearted, God-fearing woman – much like the woman Waters herself had become in her public image. Similar to how she had played Hagar in *Mamba's Daughters* to tell her Momweeze's story, she embraced the role of Dicey as a means to tell her Mom's (her biological grandmother Sally) story; and much like the loving mother-daughter relationship she found with Fredi Washington in *Mamba*, she formed a strong bond with her *Pinky* co-star Jeanne Crain. "It seems that Miss Crain is really Pinky my granddaughter. I can feel the sorrow that nearly struck me down when her [Pinky's] mother, my [Dicey's] daughter died and left me with her to raise."¹¹¹

Likely because she had a loveless childhood, Waters would later build a family around her through unconventional means, and would work to cultivate parental relationships over her younger co-stars. Although Waters had never had children of her own, she informally adopted the daughter of a friend. The little girl, Algretta, was about three years old at the time of the "adoption" and accompanied Waters on her trip to Europe in 1929. The child was diagnosed with

¹¹⁰Regester, *African American Actresses*, 247.

¹¹¹Harry Levette, "Gossip of Movie Lots," *Pittsburgh Courier* (24 May 1949), 12, quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 437.

infantile paralysis in 1933, and sent to recover away from Waters.¹¹² According to Bogle, Waters at one time was taking care of twelve “adopted” children in her apartment; these were also children of friends, unofficial “adoptions,” in which Waters would support and care for the children while parents came and went. Three children lived with her full time, and nearly all called her “Mom.”¹¹³ This kind of maternal affection, and certainly the harrowing experience of Algretta’s illness, informed Waters’s understanding of the role of Dicey and allowed her to take on her character’s traits as her own, once again.

Waters’s relationship with the original director, John Ford, was anything but pleasant. As reported by later director, Elia Kazan, Ford was overly harsh and rude with Waters on set, and she retreated in response. Kazan was appointed director following MGM producer and studio executive Darryl F. Zanuck’s firing of Ford; his relationship with Waters fared much better.

Taking the same approach that Vernon Duke had adopted earlier, Kazan recalled:

[I] gentled Waters and treated her as if she was intelligent – which she was, in a rather paranoid way – and pretty soon the old girl knew I liked her and settled down to good work[...] I’d never been this close to an old-line Black before, but pretty soon she was kissing me every morning when she arrived on the set, doing whatever I asked, and at the end of the afternoon, when I told her she’d done well, asking the Lord to pour down His blessing on me.¹¹⁴

The chance to work with a supportive director was one Waters had never encountered before, and it allowed her to perform at her best. Yet also similar to Duke, Kazan’s recollection highlighted that his relationship with the actor had forced him into contact with racial lines that were still deeply inscribed in 1949. That both Duke and Kazan commented directly on that is a

¹¹²Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 222.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 236–38, 281.

¹¹⁴Elia Kazan, quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 436.

token indication of the racial politics that played so prominent a role in Waters's career, such that her responses to them were a defining character trait both before *Cabin* and after.

Waters's appreciated the role of Dicey as it afforded her the chance to express her religious faith, just as she had been able to do with Petunia. Even in getting the part, Waters gave thanks to God. "I didn't have the money to get to Hollywood to make the picture, but I did have a car. I knew I had to get there, and my faith told me I would[...] The snow was awful[...] But we got there. That was my faith helping me again."¹¹⁵ Waters, again, *became* Dicey; the lines she delivered, telling Pinky to get on her knees and pray for forgiveness were words written by someone else, but were felt by Waters. Waters shared Dicey's struggles against her race and education. Part of Waters's choice to accept the role of Dicey was the opportunity it gave her to portray on film, another time, her great faith and admiration for her grandmother Sally.

Waters worked on *Pinky* for twelve weeks, three at half pay.¹¹⁶ When the film was released, Waters emerged triumphant.

I been through hell for ten years, waiting to come back to New York the right way – but now I'm back. And the same people that shut me out – denied me – I'm proud I can shake their hands – and wish them well. I could have evened up a few scores [...] but now I say God bless 'em all, because God blessed me and brought me back. I say thank you, God.¹¹⁷

With this new conviction of being "back," Waters would embark on another twelve years of acting, with one more major role to add to her resume.

¹¹⁵Ethel Waters, *Boston Globe* (1 April 1951), CF; quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 434.

¹¹⁶Waters, *Sparrow*, 272.

¹¹⁷Quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 446–47.

Waters's last great role was that of Berenice, in the Broadway-to-film production *The Member of the Wedding*. Like the process Waters went through becoming Petunia in *Cabin in the Sky*, Waters initially turned down the role in the play. When theater producer Bob Whitehead approached her with the script, she recalled:

I read it and shook my head. 'There is still no God in this play,' I told him. 'Berenice, the cook, is nasty. She's lost her faith. I won't play such a character.' Bob Whitehead asked if I would come to New York and talk with Carson McCullers[...] 'But don't get the wrong impression,' I told him. 'I need the job and the money. Especially the money. I'm ten thousand dollars in debt right now, but I still can't be in a play without any God in it.' When I got to New York I told all that to Carson McCullers[...] She and Bob Whitehead finally agreed to let me give the role my own interpretation, and I signed a contract[...]¹¹⁸

Her own interpretation satisfied her: "She had been buffeted plenty, but now she was not without humor, and she had retained her faith in God."¹¹⁹ The show ran at the Empire Theatre in New York 5 January 1950 to 17 March 1951, for 501 performances.¹²⁰

Just short of a year after *The Member of the Wedding* closed on Broadway, producer Stanley Kramer with Columbia Pictures purchased the movie rights for \$75,000. Starring Waters in a reprise of her role as Berenice, and with the other two co-stars also coming from the stage production, there were few conflicts between the cast members. Fred Zimmerman, director, reported:

Waters was a wonderful, sad woman[...] But she was also a very headstrong lady. She clung to the play, and it was difficult to get her to change or to unlearn some of her lines and stage movements[...] I remember that on several occasions when she disagreed with the directions I was giving her, she would look up

¹¹⁸Waters, *Sparrow*, 272–73.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 274.

¹²⁰"The Member of the Wedding" show homepage <http://ibdb.com/production.php?id=1850> accessed 13 March 2015.

to heaven and say “God is my director.” You can imagine that it wasn’t easy to find a comeback to that kind of remark.¹²¹

With little conflict on set – certainly nothing like the outbursts that characterized her earlier career – Waters gave another moving performance, but the audience reception was negative overall.

Several lesser-profile films followed from Ethel Waters until 1961, when her health issues began to interfere with her professional life. Her last stage appearance had occurred five years earlier, in the 1956 play *The Voice of Strangers*. Although not performing in professional settings like the theater or on screen, Waters still performed in a new capacity – as a worshipper with Billy Graham and his crusades. Special appearances on variety shows continued into the last years of her life, and she maintained a public image through the end of her life. In 1977, after a nearly sixty year career, Ethel Waters died of a combination of health issues. Her legacy has been continued through posthumous induction into the Grammy, Christian Music, and Gospel Music Halls of Fame, as well as on a 1994 commemorative stamp, and her 1951 autobiography has been adapted into a stage musical.

Following her long career on stage and screen, Waters decided to leave another legacy, in the form of her 1951 autobiography. More than any other example of it, this work serves to illustrate the ways in which Waters was crafting her own image and put great care into her self-representation. Throughout, she refers constantly to the same devices she did in her long career, to portray herself – usually correctly, if somewhat exaggeratedly – as a strong woman who was challenged by circumstance and trusted in her faith to see her to better days. She usually skirts the issues that other authors so enthusiastically pick up on – her conflicts with other entertainers are often glossed over or ignored; she never addresses the issue of dark versus light black skin

¹²¹Quoted in Bogle, *Heat Wave*, 470–71.

tones, nor touches on the negative aspects co-stars recalled of working with her. Any mention she makes of her shortcomings she minimizes, asks the Lord's forgiveness for, and moves on. More than anything *Sparrow* is a testament to the noble, God-fearing woman of dignity Waters so wanted to be seen as, and follows closely in her lifelong attention to crafting her public image against the realities of a black woman of ambition carving out a career

CONCLUSION

Surveying the landscape of Ethel Waters's dramatic output, *Cabin in the Sky* stands out clearly as both the high- and turning-point of her career. For more than twenty years in vaudeville, Broadway, and film, Waters cultivated an image of herself as a sophisticated and talented performer, who could shimmy and shake, and sing the most moving renditions of iconic songs like "Stormy Weather." Always embroiled within racial tensions, Waters consistently pitted herself against the lighter-skinned black actors she felt were encroaching on her territory, resulting in fraught relationships like hers with Lena Horne; she also consistently fought against the categorization at play in Hollywood and on stage of darker, older black women as mammy-types. Her role of Petunia at once challenged each of these labels, while allowing her to maintain her image as a talented black entertainer. In crafting the character of Petunia to her own desires and ideals, Waters created a role that showcased her own strengths – including singing and dancing – and her unshakeable faith in God, and yet was truthful in its portrayal of her relationships with other African American women. As the last chance to be a romantic lead, Waters's Petunia brought together the multiple strands of her decades-long career and resulted in the role that would define her for generations.

The pivotal importance of the role of Petunia cannot be understated in Waters's career, and yet is one that is too often treated as a blip. Highlighting "Taking a Chance on Love" as the primary redeeming quality of the show, many scholars only briefly address the delicate topics at play within *Cabin in the Sky* and save more in-depth analyses for other shows. The rather odd

plot of *Cabin* did not initially lend itself to the kind of character Waters wanted to play, but after much negotiation between Waters and the writers and producers, Petunia became a role she could tackle. In her complex characterization, Waters as Petunia battled her own demons of female jealousy and maintaining her faith through various tribulations, and ultimately had to take a step back from Hollywood. When she returned, it was as a victorious, though changed woman, who would play only two more roles, no longer the glamorous singer of decades past, but a dignified grandmotherly type who projected an understanding and wisdom about the woes of the world.

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